

Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's Who in Christian History*.

NEWTON, JOHN (1725–1807)

Anglican clergyman and hymn writer

Born in London, for a few years of his very early life Newton attended school at Stratford in Essex. But from the age of eleven until seventeen he served on a merchant ship of which his father was commander, plying the Mediterranean. At the age of nineteen he was impressed into the British naval service aboard the man-of-war *Harwich*. Through his father's influence he was made a midshipman, but when he tried to escape he was flogged and degraded. Not long thereafter he entered the service of a slave dealer who was sailing the ocean between Africa and ports in which he could sell the slaves. In 1747, at the age of twenty-two, Newton himself became master of a slave ship. During his voyages he applied himself to learning mathematics, the classics, and later the Bible.

During a storm at sea in 1748 he experienced conversion from what he himself later called a life of debauchery. He abandoned shipping in 1755 and until 1760 held the post of surveyor of the tides at Liverpool. There he met George Whitefield and somewhat later John Wesley and came under their influence. So deep was his experience that he began to study Greek and Hebrew privately in preparation for the ministry, hesitating for a while between the free churches and the Anglican priesthood. Although not at first acceptable to the authorities of the state church, he ultimately received presentation as curate of the church at Olney, where at the age of thirty-nine he was ordained (1764).

In that same year he published an autobiographical account of his sea-going and religious experiences, *The Authentic Narrative*. In 1767 the poet William Cowper settled at Olney and became a parishioner and friend of Newton. The latter had developed some poetic talent, and in 1779 he and Cowper collaborated in preparing and publishing a collection called *Olney Hymns*. Earlier Newton had published his *Olney Sermons*. Troubles arose that caused him to remove in 1780 to a London parish where his "extempore" preaching attracted a large following. An extensive religious correspondence gave rise to a collection of his letters called *Cardiphonia* (1781). In 1792 he was awarded the D.D. degree by the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Toward the end of his life he became blind, but he still continued his incessant preaching.

Like many of his contemporary clerics, Newton was essentially Calvinistic in his theology. But in his fervor and zeal he found his closest associates among the Wesleyans. He also took great interest in some social concerns, especially the abolition of the slave trade. After he left Olney for his London parish, he is reputed to have exercised some influence on William Wilberforce in that regard.

But it is for his hymns that Newton has his permanent recognition. There are four in particular that are still in general use. Two are in the popular common meter: "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds in a Believer's Ear" and "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound." By itself the latter would be almost sufficient for Newton's continuing fame. A third, "Safely through Another Week God Hath Brought Us on Our Way," is probably the most widely known hymn in English in honor of the Sabbath. But a fourth, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken, Zion, City of Our God," is remarkable for three reasons. As a praise of the church, it shows that Newton, for all his evangelical fervor (which was primarily individualistic), did not neglect the total company of God's people, the holy catholic church. It is also in part a version of [Psalm 87](#), showing that Newton was in the stalwart tradition of metrical psalmody. Lastly, the particular rhythm of the hymn is noteworthy. It is the popular Goliardic rhythm used in both secular and

religious poetry of the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas employed it in his “Pange, lingua, gloriosi corporis mysterium.” Thus Newton was a representative of the incipient Romantic movement, which followed the rationalism of the eighteenth century.

See: John Newton. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.
[John Newton](#)